

ALIGNING ASSESSMENTS WITH THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The goal of the Common Core State Standards Initiative is to ensure that states have a progression of K-12 standards in place that ensure that students have the knowledge and skills in mathematics and English Language Arts to graduate from high school ready for college and careers. Just as states will need to modify or create new curriculum frameworks and instructional materials to match the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), states will also need to significantly alter their assessments to ensure alignment with the CCSS.

Assessments play a critical role in state education systems, providing consistent measures of whether or not students are meeting or exceeding the state's academic standards. A coherent assessment *system* anchored in college- and career-ready expectations will include a combination of measures designed to meet the following goals:

- Effectively measure the depth and breadth of the CCSS;
- Inform and improve the quality and consistency of instruction;
- Indicate whether or not students are reaching mileposts that signify readiness; and
- Hold educators and schools accountable for improving student performance and readying students for postsecondary education and careers.

The release of the CCSS offers a unique opportunity for states to take a hard look at their current assessment systems and make the design- and policy-based decisions necessary to move to next-generation assessment systems. As states begin to implement the CCSS, they have the opportunity to strengthen and significantly improve their assessment systems. Assessments given in grades 3-8 and high school should be designed to indicate whether students are on track to graduate ready for college and careers. And all assessments should do a better job measuring the more sophisticated knowledge and skills called for in the CCSS than is possible with most current assessments.

There are a number of important ways state assessment systems will need to evolve to measure the CCSS. States will need to:

- Refocus their assessments to measure the essential knowledge and skills targeted by the CCSS;
- Improve the quality and types of items included in on-demand tests to create more cognitively-challenging tasks that measure higher-order thinking and analytic skills, such as reasoning and problem solving;
- Move beyond a single, end-of-year test to open the door for performance measures and extended tasks that do a better job of measuring important college- and career-ready skills and model exemplary forms of classroom instruction; and
- With their higher education communities, establish a college- and career-ready “anchor” assessment given to all students near the end of high school to signal whether students are ready for college and careers. Anchoring the system in college and career readiness ensures that tests given in lower grade levels are vertically aligned to the high school assessments so they signal whether students are on pace.

----- ON THE ROAD TO IMPLEMENTATION -----

It is important to note that even if states plan to move to common assessments, a number of these changes could be incorporated in to their current assessment systems now before any common assessments come online in 2014-15.

THE PROMISE OF COMMON ASSESSMENTS

While states that adopt the Common Core State Standards will need to evolve their assessment systems, they will not need to do it alone. In keeping with the spirit of multistate collaboration that fueled the creation of the common core, states now have the opportunity to work together to develop a shared assessment system to measure student learning against the CCSS. Through the Race to the Top grant competition, the U.S. Department of Education has allotted \$350 million in federal funds to state consortia for the development of common assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

Three consortia of states have formed to apply for the assessment funds. The *Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers* (PARCC) is a group of 26 states committed to building a next-generation assessment system for grades 3 through high school. The system will be anchored by college- and career-ready tests in high school, and will include a combination of end-of-year assessments and “through-course” assessments administered throughout the school year. In addition, the system will include optional formative tests, starting in kindergarten. The system will also be completely computer based. Achieve is coordinating the work of PARCC. The *Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium* (SBAC) is a group of 31 states that proposes developing adaptive, online tests including required summative exams, combined with performance tasks given through the year, and optional formative exams. Finally, the *State Consortium on Board Examinations Systems* is the only consortium to apply for the \$30 million Race to the Top High School Course Assessment Program, and plans to use a competitive process to select at least three board examination systems that include courses in the core subjects aligned to the CCSS, to be administered at the end of 10th grade.

The benefits of having common assessments are clear. Multistate consortia:

- Provide a common and consistent measure of student performance across states, which will allow states to compare performance on a common metric;
- Offer an opportunity for states to pool financial and intellectual resources to develop better assessments while reducing the cost to each state;
- Allow states to move collectively to next-generation assessment systems by leveraging innovations in research and technology that are harder for individual states to achieve on their own; and
- Provide opportunities for cross-state collaboration in other critical areas, including the development of curriculum materials, formative assessments, instructional tools and teacher professional development.

TRANSITIONING TO NEXT-GENERATION ASSESSMENTS

Implementation of the CCSS and the transition to next-generation assessments will have significant implications for states. Ultimately, states will need to map out a detailed transition and phase-in strategy and timeline that identifies the key milestones for sunsetting their current state assessments and ramping up administration of the next-generation assessments. This multifaceted plan should address a host of critical issues that states and districts will need to attend to including:

- Evaluating the relationship between the old and new assessments;
- Evaluating the various cost implications of the new assessments;
- Changes in curriculum needed to ensure alignment to the new standards and assessments;
- Professional development needs to help educators prepare for the new assessments;
- New data and reporting systems needed to incorporate and provide maximum access to the new assessment results;
- Changes in the accountability system necessary to incorporate the new assessments;
- Outreach and communications strategies to ensure that parents, students, educators and others are aware of and prepared for the new system; and
- A strategy to help inform and engage State Board of Education members and legislators of the policy, practical and financial impacts of the new assessment.

The timeline for the Race to the Top assessment grant winners means that any new operational assessments developed by state consortia will not be available for full implementation until 2014-2015. This raises the question of what states should do in the interim period and how best to handle the transition. One of the most important steps during the transition will be getting educators familiar with the new standards via intensive professional development. As soon as preliminary versions of the newly designed assessments are available, it will be critical to build opportunities for educators to become familiar with the new assessment designs and instruments and to delve into the necessary changes for curriculum and instruction.

As the assessment consortia work to ensure that the next generation of assessments provides instructionally-sensitive information back to schools and teachers, it will be critical to provide educators with training on how to utilize and maximize the data generated from the assessments to inform instructional practices. Additionally, as states evolve to next-generation assessments that are designed to measure a more robust set of skills, it will be important to focus on providing professional development in the areas of instruction that have been left out of traditional assessment systems, including contextualized tasks involving extended analysis, research or communication.

The CCSS provide an extraordinary opportunity for states to pool their resources and expertise to develop next-generation assessment systems that better reflect what students need to learn to be prepared while also demonstrating greater utility for instruction and accountability purposes. States should seize the opportunity in the period ahead.